



FIFTH DISEASE (Erythema Infectiosum)

What is Fifth disease?

Fifth disease is an infection which, in children, often appears as a bright red rash on the face. It is sometimes called “slapped face” disease. Adults may experience joint pain.

What causes Fifth disease and how is it spread?

Fifth disease is caused by a virus called parvovirus B19. A person with Fifth disease can spread it to others by coughing or sneezing. Sometimes you can get the disease just by touching the saliva or nasal discharge (e.g. a wet hanky or tissue) of a person with the disease and then touching your own eyes or mouth. A pregnant woman who gets Fifth disease can pass it to her unborn baby.

Who can get Fifth disease?

You can get Fifth disease at any age, although it is more common in young children. Once you have had it you are protected, or immune, from getting sick with the virus again. About half of all adults have already had Fifth disease, and therefore can't catch it again. However, most preschoolers and school-age children have not had it. So, if the virus is around, children are more likely than adults to get it.

What are the symptoms of Fifth disease?

Many of the symptoms (fever, rash, cough or runny nose) also occur with illnesses caused by other viruses. About a quarter of all people who get Fifth disease have no symptoms.

These are the most common signs of Fifth disease that are different from other diseases:

- About three weeks after being exposed to the virus, a red rash may appear on the face. This rash has a shape which makes it look like the cheeks have been slapped, while the area around the mouth is pale. These signs are usually seen only in children.
- A red, spotty, lace-like rash may appear on the arms and may spread to the chest, back and thighs. The rash may fade away and then come back or get worse when the person is exposed to heat, such as a warm bath or direct sunlight. The rash can persist for several weeks. The rash may not appear at all, or may look different in adults.
- Adults may have pain in their joints. This may be the only symptom for infected adults.

Is Fifth disease serious?

Fifth disease is usually mild. However, there are three groups of persons at risk for serious complications if infected:

- Persons with chronic hemolytic anemias (like sickle cell disease) who can get life-threatening complications.
- Persons whose immune systems do not work well.
- Pregnant women. If a pregnant woman is infected, she can pass the infection on to the developing baby. When this happens in the first half of the pregnancy, there is a very small risk that the baby can die in the womb. This happens very rarely later in pregnancy. Babies born to mothers who were infected while pregnant do **not** have an increased risk of birth defects.

What should I do if I or my child has been in contact with Fifth disease?

- If you have been exposed to someone with Fifth disease you should watch for cold-like symptoms over the next four to 20 days.
- If such symptoms occur, cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze to prevent airborne droplets from spreading. Wash your hands often to avoid spreading the virus to others. After using tissues throw them directly into the garbage and, again, wash your hands.
- If you are pregnant, or have anemia or a condition which lowers your resistance to infections, you should let your physician know that you have been in contact with Fifth disease.

What should I do if I get Fifth disease?

If you think that your child has Fifth disease and you are in one of the groups at risk for complications, you should contact your physician. Other illnesses caused by viruses, such as rubella or measles, can have similar symptoms. Sometimes a blood test may be needed to tell the difference. If you have Fifth disease, by the time the rash appears you will no longer be able to spread the virus to others. Therefore, once the rash appears, there is no reason to stay away from work or school as long as you feel well.

NOTE: If you are pregnant when you develop Fifth disease, there is a small chance your baby will also be infected. Discuss this with your doctor.

For additional information, contact your local Public Health office or your family doctor.

March 2004